

Emotional Intensity in Gifted Children

Giftedness has an emotional as well as intellectual component. Intellectual complexity goes hand in hand with emotional depth. Just as gifted children's thinking is more complex and has more depth than other children's, so too are their emotions more complex and more intense.

Complexity can be seen in the vast range of emotions that gifted children can experience at any one time and the intensity is evident in the "full-on-ness" about everything with which parents and teachers of the gifted children are so familiar.

Emotional intensity in the gifted is not a matter of feeling more than other people, but a different way of experiencing the world: vivid, absorbing, penetrating, encompassing, complex, commanding – a way of being quiveringly alive.

Emotional intensity can be expressed in many different ways:

- as intensity of feeling – positive feelings, negative feelings, both positive and negative feelings together, extremes of emotion, complex emotion that seemingly move from one feeling to another over a short time period, identification with the feelings of other people, laughing and crying together
- in the body – the body mirrors the emotions and feelings are often expressed as bodily symptoms such as tense stomach, sinking heart, blushing, headache, nausea
- inhibition – timidity and shyness
- strong affective memory – emotionally intense children can remember the feelings that accompanied an incident and will often relive and 're-feel' them long afterward
- fears and anxieties, feelings of guilt, feelings of being out of control
- concerns with death, depressive moods
- emotional ties and attachments to others, empathy and concern for others, sensitivity in relationships, attachment to animals, difficulty in adjusting to new environments, loneliness, conflicts with others over the depth of relationships
- critical self-evaluation and self-judgment, feelings of inadequacy and inferiority

Many people seem unaware that intense emotions are part of giftedness and little attention is paid to emotional intensity. Historically the expression of intense feelings has been seen a sign of emotional instability rather than as evidence of a rich inner life. The traditional Western view is of emotions and intellect as separate and contradictory entities, there is however, an inextricable link between emotions and intellect and, combined, they have a profound effect on gifted people. It is emotional intensity that fuels joy in life, passion for learning, the drive for expression of a talent area, the motivation for achievement.

Feeling everything more deeply than others do can both be painful and frightening. Emotionally intense gifted people often feel abnormal. "There must be something wrong with me... maybe I'm crazy... nobody else seems to feel like this." Emotionally intense gifted people often experience intense inner conflict, self-criticism, anxiety and feelings of inferiority. The medical community tends to see these conflicts as symptoms and labels gifted people neurotic. They are however an intrinsic part of being gifted and provide the drive that gifted people have for personal growth and achievement.

It is vitally important that gifted children are taught to see their heightened sensitivity to things that happen in the world as a normal response for them. If this is not made clear to them they may see their own intense experiences as

evidence that something is wrong with them. Other children may ridicule a gifted child for reacting strongly to an apparently trivial incident, thereby increasing the child's feeling of being odd. Also sensitivity to society's injustice and hypocrisy can lead many emotionally intense gifted children to feel despair and cynicism at very young ages.

The most important thing we can do to nurture emotionally intense gifted children is to accept their emotions: they need to feel understood and supported. Explain that intense feelings are normal for gifted children. Help them to use their intellect to develop self-awareness and self-acceptance.

Parents need to exercise appropriate discipline as this helps develop a sense of security that leads to the development of self-discipline and a feeling of emotional competency. Appropriate discipline is the consistent application of values, rules and behaviours that are held to be important in the family. Explain the benefit of rules to the child and enforce them through consequence of behaviour.

Discuss feelings openly; the negative as well as the positive. It can be helpful to use an "emotional thermometer" to initiate discussion eg "on a scale of 1-10, how are you feeling today?" Take time to listen to children's ideas, opinions and feelings. Be non-judgmental: don't interrupt, moralize, distract or give advice.

Appreciate their sensitivities, intensities and passions. Don't try to minimize their emotions because you feel uncomfortable with their pain. It doesn't help to say "you're too sensitive" or "snap out of it" or "it'll be OK".

Reassure them when they are afraid and help them to find ways of expressing their intense emotions through stories, poems, art work, music, journal entries or physical activities. Realize that they become frustrated when their physical capabilities do not match their intellectual ability and help them to deal with this. Reward the process of effort and not only the outcome. Emphasize strengths and don't dwell on shortcomings.

Realize that sensitivity does not mean weakness. Give them responsibility that is age appropriate and do not over protect them from the world and from the consequence of their actions. Remember that they are children first and gifted second. Don't expect them to be little "adults". Play, fun and leisure activities are essential for strong emotional development.

Finally, seek preventative professional counseling where appropriate; it is important both to support healthy emotional development and to prevent social and emotional problems.

We can help our emotionally intense gifted children to accept their inner world of experience and value it as strength. This often means we have to accept and value our own emotional experience and feelings so that we can be a positive role model for children. Speaking about and valuing our emotions can be very difficult to do in a society that values rational, logical thinking and sees emotions as the opposite of rationality. However, if emotional intensity is seen by parents and teachers and presented positively to children as a strength, children can be helped to understand and value this gift. In this way emotionally intense children will be empowered to express their unique selves in the world and use their gifts and talents with confidence and joy.

References

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